




Give'em the old Razzle Dazzle

*Barnum and Bailey has nothing on
the 129th Rescue Wing!*

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Photo by Ted Carlson/
Fotodynamics

Barnum and Bailey might claim to have the Greatest Show on Earth, but its show pales in comparison to the missions of California's 129th Rescue Wing, one of only three search and rescue units in the entire Air National Guard. Forget the elephants, the clowns, and the trapeze artists. Who needs trapeze artists and elephants when the 129th has pilots that fly through the air with the greatest of ease in huge MC-130P "Combat Shadow" aircraft equipped with digital scan radar, forward looking infrared systems, radio tracking equipment, and a GPS navigational unit that can pinpoint a victim's location hundreds of miles at sea—even in inclement weather? Pilots of the 129th also fly HH-60G "Pavehawk" rescue helicopters equipped with refueling probes that allow them to be refueled in mid-air by their "Combat Shadow" mother ships. Such refueling enables the helicopters to perform rescue missions up to a thousand miles at sea.

A large, detailed photograph of an HH-60G Pavehawk helicopter in flight. The helicopter is painted in a green and white camouflage pattern. It is shown from a low angle, flying towards the right. The background is a clear blue sky and a hazy, arid landscape. The helicopter's main rotor blades are blurred, indicating motion. The tail boom has the number '6119' visible. The landing gear is extended.

*The 129th Rescue Wing
has an impressive
record of nearly 300
life saves!*

Barnum and Bailey might have an exclusive on clowns dressed in funny costumes, but the 129th has Pararescue Specialists (PJs) dressed in wet suits and scuba gear. These PJs are among the best trained and most physically fit members of the military. Many of the 129th's rescue missions require the PJs to parachute from the MC-130s or the HH-60Gs at altitudes ranging from 800 feet to above 10,000 feet. They can also jump from a "Pavehawk" hovering as low as 10 feet above the water. And, whereas, Barnum and Bailey's Greatest Show on Earth is merely confined to a three-ring big-top, the 129th uses the entire world as its arena. Sound exciting? Eat your heart out, Barnum and Bailey, you ain't heard nothing yet!

A typical rescue mission for the 129th might begin with the captain of a fishing trawler 900 miles at sea radioing the U.S. Coast Guard to help rescue one of his fishermen who has been stricken with an attack of appendicitis. The man's appendix could rupture at any time. If the Coast Guard can't meet the challenges of a long-range rescue, it will forward a rescue request through the Air Force Rescue Coordination Center which will give the tasking to the 129th Rescue Squadron. Once that occurs, a planning cell is immediately assembled at the 129th to build a plan, assess the risk, and determine the necessary resources to execute a safe and successful rescue mission. This particular mission calls for an MC-130P and a "Pavehawk" helicopter to be launched for a four-hour flight through inclement weather. Since the range of the "Pavehawk" is only 500 miles, air refueling will be necessary. During the trip to the vessel, an air refueling hookup is needed between the two



PJs and HH-60G rescue helicopters from the 129th Rescue Wing perform the unit's 296th, 297th, and 298th life saves from a cruise ship 575 miles at sea, March 19, 2003. Remarkably, this mission closely paralleled the events described in this article.

maneuver highly challenging. Once the refueling is complete, the MC-130 pinpoints the trawler's location and the "Pavehawk" follows. The trawler is sighted, but, due to the pitching of the vessel in the rough sea and the ship's long radio antenna, lowering the PJs by winch is found to be too dangerous. So the PJs jump into the ocean from the hovering helicopter, and use an inflatable motor-driven raft to reach the patient. What about sharks? Forget about sharks! Let Steven Spielberg worry about them. A man's life is at stake, and every minute counts.

Once in the water, the PJs inflate the raft, and they make their way to the trawler while the helicopter continues to hover nearby. Once aboard the trawler, the PJs administer medical aid to the stricken fisherman while the MC-130 crew orbits the area and relays the status of the mission and the patient's condition to the 129th's home base.

The PJs on scene determine that the patient's condition requires that he be loaded aboard the helicopter by hoist—directly from the vessel—a much more dangerous procedure, due to the pitching of the trawler and the obstacles protruding from it. The "Pavehawk" crew carefully maneuvers its aircraft to the aft end of the rolling vessel to avoid the ship's protruding tower and antenna. Hovering with the utmost skill, and with the assistance of the PJs, the stricken fisherman is hoisted aboard the helicopter and the PJs follow. Once aboard the helicopter, the PJs care for the patient during the long journey back to shore. But potential danger still lies ahead. An additional air refueling hookup is necessary, and the weather is again a critical factor. Once again, the refueling is successful. Hours later, the helicopter lands at Moffett Federal Airfield, where the patient is taken by ambulance to the Stanford University Medical Center. Mission accomplished. Another job well done, and another life saved thanks to the men and women of the 129th Rescue Wing.

But the 129th's missions are by no means limited to peacetime rescues launched from its home base. Since September 2002, four of the 129th's HH-60Gs and two of its MC-130Ps have been stationed at Incirlik Air Base in Turkey where 150 men and women of the 129th have been performing 90-day

rotations in support of Operation NORTHERN WATCH: the enforcement of the no-fly zone over Northern Iraq. Their job is to perform any combat search and rescue missions needed to rescue allied aircrews that have been downed in hostile territory. The 129th's aircraft in Turkey are equipped the same as they are at home, except for one major difference: the "Pavehawks" in a combat zone are equipped with M-240 or GAU-2 machine guns. Thankfully, no actual rescue missions have been necessary to date.

A second 150-person team from the 129th rotated to Turkey in support of Operation NORTHERN WATCH in December 2002 for

PJs from the 129th Rescue Wing return from a mission.



what was thought to be a 90-day mission. Such was not the case. In January 2003, the team was "frozen" in place by presidential order for the duration of hostilities. This means that these members of the 129th could be required to perform in an even greater Greatest Show on Earth—a show in which the admission is by presidential decree, and the finale is victory over an autocratic dictator and freedom for an oppressed nation. Let's see if any of Barnum and Bailey's razzle dazzle can top that!

EDITORS NOTE: Although the rescue described in this article is meant to be fictitious, a portion of the described events was taken directly from an awards citation involving an actual rescue mission performed by the 129th Rescue Wing. 🐻